

### 31. FIRST RECORD OF THE SUNBEAM SNAKE *XENOPELTIS UNICOLOR* REINWARDT, 1827 (SERPENTES: XENOPELTIDAE) FROM GREAT NICOBAR ISLAND

The sunbeam snake or iridescent Earth snake *Xenopeltis unicolor* is the sole representative of the family Xenopeltidae. It derives its name from the iridescence of its smooth scales. This species is distributed over south India, Burma, Indo-China, the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago (Boulenger 1893). Recently a new species *Xenopeltis hainanensis* found in the southern People's Republic of China has been described (Mehrtens 1987).

Specimens have been recorded from the Andaman Islands by Theobald (1868) and are found in the reptilia collection of the Zoological Survey of India (Biswas and Sanyal 1980). This is the first record of this species from the Nicobar Islands. The specimen was collected, and later released, by a 'Ranchi' tribal on Great Nicobar Island. Locally it is called 'tael-sap'.

*Xenopeltis* is the single genus of the family Xenopeltidae and has several unique characters. In addition to the occipital shield and loss of the postfrontal bone, the auditory bones are different from any other snake, except *Cylindrophis rufus* (Smith 1943).

The species has the following characteristics: snout rounded; head depressed and not distinct from the neck; eyes small with vertically elliptic pupils; nostril between two small nasals; interparietal about as large as the parietals; loreal absent; large preocular and two large postoculars; small supraoculars; numerous small, equal teeth; mental groove present;

eight upper labials, first in contact with the internasal, fourth and fifth touching the eye; a pair of small chin shields, in contact with the three anterior lower labials; body cylindrical and covered with smooth scales in 15 rows; ventrals (173-196) well developed (Boulenger (1893) reports a ventral count of 166-193 in this species); tail short and subcaudals (24-31) in two rows (Smith 1943). The snake varies from black to brown in colour, with a whitish-grey venter.

A nocturnal animal, it burrows into the earth and is generally found in rice fields, lowland river valleys, and places with damp soil. It is a harmless snake, feeding on small mammals, frogs, snakes and birds, and has not been known to bite when handled. When excited it vibrates its tail vigorously. It is oviparous, laying about 18 eggs in a clutch. Large adults grow up to a metre in length; the average size is somewhat less. Very little of its biology is known.

The following morphological data was collected for the specimen found on Great Nicobar Island:

**Total length:** 51.1 cm; **Snout-vent:** 46.3 cm, **Head-width (jaws):** 12.55 mm, **Upper labials :** 8, **Lower labials:** 10, **Mid body count:** 15, **Ventrals:** 171, **Subcaudals:** 24.

I thank John for finding this snake and bringing it to me alive.

June 4, 1992

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### 32. STRANGE BEHAVIOUR OF A MURREL *CHANNA STRIATUS* (BL.)

On 1 March 1991 at about 0830 hrs I, along with two friends, was walking along the shallow shore of the lake, watching aquatic birds. Near the

shore we came across a small, discarded wooden boat, partly submerged in the lake. All the sides of the boat were above the water but inside there was

water up to about three fourths the length of the boat.

As we approached the boat a fish jumped out from inside the boat and landed in the lake. I examined the boat for other fish but there were none inside. The stagnant water inside the boat was full of small larvae, probably of mosquitoes.

We retreated about 20 m from the boat to find out what kind of fish it was and how it had entered the boat. Within seven minutes a fish broke water and landed inside the boat. When I tried to approach the boat close enough to watch the fish, it again jumped from the boat and escaped into the lake. This was repeated five times. I could make out that it was a

murrel, but could not identify the species.

After some time we saw a boat with fishermen. We hailed them and requested them to catch this fish. When the murrel returned to the boat, one of the fishermen threw a net over the boat and caught the fish by hand. It was identified as *Channa striatus*.

After that we dragged the boat out of the water and found that, except for two small holes of about 3x2 cm, the entire bottom was intact. How the murrel came to know that there was water inside that boat with plenty of food in the shape of larvae is a mystery to me.

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RAZA TEHSIN

### 33. RECENT OBSERVATIONS ON THE LONGEVITY OF *MEGALOPS CYPRINOIDES* (BROUSS.)

In my previous note in the Society's *Journal* (Kulkarni 1983), I had mentioned different reports about longevity of certain fishes. These contained some anecdotes and indirect deductions also. Even Lagler *et al.* (1977) merely mention "authenticated records of ages of captive fishes suggest that ages of most venerated old carp do not exceed 50 years." The present note extends the limit to 52 years.

In the earlier note I had given a dependable record of the longevity of the Indian tarpon *Megalops cyprinoides* (Brouss.) being not less than 44 years in the fresh water of Walwan lake at Lonavla, dist. Pune (Maharashtra). After the study of breeding biology of the mahseer fish commenced in the above lake (Kulkarni 1971), every year in the months of July and August, when a particular section of the lake (which the fish appeared to prefer) was netted for the collection of ripe mahseer specimens for their artificial fecundation, a few individuals of *Megalops* were entangled accidentally in the nets, indicating that they had continued to survive there. Not much notice was taken of this occurrence. However, since 1983, I had kept a close watch on the survival of this species in the lake. In the note I had recounted how this marine or partly estuarine fish happened to be found in the fresh waters of the lake. Fingerlings of *Megalops* were introduced into the lake as a cyclopscidal fish for control of guinea worm pest (Setna and Kulkarni 1940) and also as a good sport fish, by Fisheries Section of the then Bombay Presidency in July 1939 (vide Annual Report of the Dept. of Industries, 1939-40).

During one of the aforesaid type of fishing operations on 11 August 1991 a specimen of the

above species was caught and measured for its length and weight. This marine fish spends only a short period (four to five months) in estuarine waters and then returns to the sea; it is not known to breed in fresh waters; neither smaller specimens nor fingerlings were ever captured during the past 20 years. It was thus clear that the specimen caught on that day belonged to the batch of fingerlings released in 1939. Moreover, there was no fresh stocking of *Megalops* after that year which I know quite definitely, being in charge of the Dept. of Fisheries till October 1969. These facts indicate that the fish could be at least 52 years of age (two years more than what Lagler *et al.* 1977 reported).

Surprisingly enough the fish had grown very little during the past twenty years. In 1970, some individuals were recorded to be 65 cm in length and 2.8 kg. in weight (Kulkarni 1983) while those caught in 1983 were 67 cm in length and weighed between 2.75 and 3.1 kg. This stagnation in growth was further confirmed by the specimen caught in August 1991, being only 67 cm in length and 3 kg in weight. This shows that after a certain growth in fresh water the fish just survives without gaining weight or length. The stagnation could not be due to lack of food because the lake had an abundance of aquatic life on which the *Megalops* normally feed, but could be due to having reached its normal maximum size. The F.A.O. identification sheet mentions only 55 cm as maximum length. Incidentally, the above observations provide a slightly improved record of growth of the fish.

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